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Dial-a-doctor

Service is gaining traction at nursing homes

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PhoneDOCTORx, a telemedicine company focused on serving nursing home patients, has just opened a second call center in Cambridge, and has reached 30,000 clinical calls. The Fairhaven-based business, which uses patents developed by its practice management company affiliate **American Doctors Online**, plans to increase its staff by about 50 percent in the coming year to up to 35 employees, as it seeks to be adopted at a larger swath of the state's 421 nursing homes.

PhoneDOCTORx has a powerful partner in this strategy: **Senior Whole Health**, a Cambridge health care payer that bundles payments from Medicare and Medicaid to care for 8,200 of the state's poorest, sickest elders.

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'I SOMETIMES TELL PEOPLE I'M ONE SHOESHINE AWAY FROM BEING HOMELESS.'

DANA GONSAL, CEO of Classic Shoeshine Corp.

A shining example of endurance

By Sean McFadden
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In the early 1980s, when he was getting started with his own shoeshine business, Dana Gonsal dreaded days it rained.

At the time, the founder and CEO of Mattapan-based **Classic Shoeshine Corp.** had a single stand inside the waiting area of a **Scrub-A-Dub** car wash in Boston's Park Square. On rainy days, the car wash would close for business — which meant no money for Gonsal. It was a bitter pill to swallow for a young entrepreneur who was then making about \$180 a week and lacked a permanent residence. In fact, Gonsal was homeless for quite some time during the early years of his business.



Dana Gonsal

Despite his company's longevity and the fact that it has become an enterprise with nine Boston-area locations — including at Logan International Airport, Boston Convention and Exhibition Center and John B. Hynes Convention Center — his early struggles are never far from Gonsal's thoughts.

"I sometimes tell people I'm one shoeshine away from being homeless," Gonsal, now 54, said.

He got his start in this business in 1976, when, at 18, he was asked to leave home by his stepfather with whom he wasn't getting along. After a brief stint working in a library, he found steady employment with Davis Shoeshine in Boston. Gonsal was making \$20 a day, plus tips, living in a rooming house in Beacon Hill.

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DOCTORS: Technology is making summoning a doctor much easier

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After more than 10 years under the radar, PhoneDOCTORx now has a foothold at about 18 of the state's nursing homes, both nonprofit and for-profit operations, and has just hired its first CEO, Brian Lane. He was brought in to scale up the operation, which will soon include franchises in other states.

"So far, we've penetrated a very small component of the state's nursing home facilities," Lane said. "Until now, we haven't put the pedal to the metal in terms of marketing efforts, but we now have the data to support the effectiveness of the business."

At a time when the health care system is desperate for solutions to the cost crisis, PhoneDOCTORx offers a way to lower health care costs for a vulnerable population by reducing unnecessary hospitalizations. PhoneDOCTORx provides emergency medicine doctors via phone and a patented videoconference cart system to nursing homes between 5 p.m. and 11 p.m. on weeknights and weekends 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. The doctors determine whether the cases are emergencies, urgent care cases that must be treated quickly but may be treated in the nursing home setting, or non-emergency situations such as a doctor telling a patient about normal lab tests or x-rays.

"One of the reasons doctors want to participate is moonlighting — an opportunity to supplement their in-

come," said Dr. Sam Shen, PhoneDOCTORx's vice president for corporate development and chairman of the department of emergency medicine at St. Luke's hospital in New Bedford. "But it's also a way for doctors who are coming to the end of their careers to continue to practice medicine without working in a hectic emergency room." Shen said it's hard to measure, but the addition of telemedicine to the nursing home setting has an appreciable impact on nurses' job satisfaction, because they have support from emergency doctors in making hospitalization decisions for their patients.

From health care payers' perspective, the appeal is simple: avoiding an unnecessary hospital admission saves, on average, \$13,000. Meanwhile the average cost of a call to PhoneDOCTORx hovers around \$40.

"I would like to see PhoneDOCTORx in all of the nursing homes where we have patients," Pam Gossman, president of Senior Whole Health said. Currently PhoneDOCTORx has partnerships with eight to 10 nursing homes with Senior Whole Health patients. Senior Whole Health foots the bill, on a per-member, per-month basis, for their patients at the nursing home, and the nursing home picks up the tab for the other patients, who are either covered by Medicare, or who pay out of pocket for nursing home care. Gossman said that the service has reduced unnecessary hospitalizations by about 57 percent for the Senior Whole Health patients served by the program.

"Nursing home patients who need to be seen in the hospital still go there, but for the vast majority of patients, they prefer to be treated in their home, and their home is the nursing home," Gossman said. In addition to avoiding uncomfortable and expensive ambulance rides — which can run \$1,000 — to a crowded ER, treating nursing home patients in place may help them avoid illnesses and injuries they could suffer in the hospital. Gossman said examples of illnesses that can be treated effectively in the nursing room setting include urinary tract infections and uncomplicated pneumonia.

While Senior Whole Health benefits directly from the cost savings provided by PhoneDOCTORx, the nursing homes do not. That's because the savings would flow back to whomever is paying for the patient's care, such as Medicare or the patient's family. But PhoneDOCTORx hopes to change that, and has plans to lobby the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to pay for the service.

But Shen says that there are still incentives for nursing homes to engage the service, in addition to boosting nurse morale.

"PhoneDOCTORx helps nursing homes meet the Medicare requirement to have a doctor on hand to answer calls within a certain amount of time — our doctors answer immediately, rather than responding to a page sometimes hours later."